

# South Korea

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## Freedom of the Press

Park Geun-hye became South Korea's first female president in February 2013 but did little to reverse the setbacks in press freedom experienced under her predecessor, Lee Myung-bak. Domestic and international media advocacy groups continued to raise concerns about the South Korean media environment, particularly regarding online censorship.

While freedom of the press is guaranteed by the constitution and generally respected in practice, Article 7 of the National Security Law prescribes imprisonment for praising or expressing sympathy for North Korea. In January 2012, Park Jung-geun, a 24-year-old photographer and blogger who reposted messages from the North Korean government's Twitter account, was arrested on charges of violating the National Security Law. While Park said his Twitter posts were meant to lampoon the North Korean regime, prosecutors charged that, regardless of his intention, his account had served as a vehicle for spreading the North's propaganda. Park was found guilty and given a 10-month suspended jail sentence in November 2012. The guilty verdict was reversed on appeal in August 2013. Defamation is a criminal offense, with sentences of up to seven years in prison, and charges are occasionally threatened or brought against reporters or commentators who criticize the government. Chung Bong-ju, a popular political commentator and former legislator, served a one-year jail term after being convicted in late 2011 of spreading false allegations about then president Lee's connection to alleged stock fraud. Chung was released in 2012, but his conviction bars him from running for public office for 10 years.

In South Korea, the Act on Disclosure of Information by Public Agencies protects the right of citizens to access public information, which can be obtained online or in person. According to the act, government agencies must respond to requests within 15 days and are required to provide all requested public information, except when protected for reasons of national security. In 2012, South Korea submitted its first action plan as part of its membership in the Open Government Partnership (OGP), an international initiative by which governments commit to increasing transparency and accountability to citizens. President Park, after taking office in early 2013, announced an initiative called Government 3.0, which is aimed at transforming the country's system of information disclosure. Her announcement was followed by the new Act Promoting Availability and Use of Public Data, passed in October as a foundational step in the initiative. The first OGP progress report for the country, assessing progress in the years 2012 and 2013, cautioned that the government's intentions were not accompanied by strong action, as proposed legislation often lacks clarity in assigning responsibility to specific agencies and fails to set definite pathways for citizens to access information. A current obstruction to journalistic access to information already exists in the country's press club system, as many ministries only permit journalists who are members of these clubs to gain access to interviews and briefings.

South Korea boasts one of the world's highest internet penetration rates, and enjoys high-speed broadband. However, the government's online content censorship has invited substantial criticism from national and international organizations advocating freedom of expression. In 2013, 22,986 webpages were deleted, another 62,658 were blocked, and 16,914 were cancelled at the request of the Korea Communications Standards Commission (KCSC), an official body responsible for monitoring online content. This censorship not only covers pornography and gambling, which are illegal in South Korea, but also content deemed "threatening national security by praising North Korea, and denouncing the U.S. and/or the (South Korean) government." Additionally, during Park's first year in office, her aides were

accused of removing hundreds of online posts by citizens that were critical of the president herself.

Independence of broadcast media companies that had been significantly degraded during former president Lee's tenure remained a concern in 2013. Little or no progress has been made in dealing with issues of government influence over government-funded broadcast media companies and media management's political interference in reporting, even despite Park's campaign pledge to address these issues. Six journalists—who had been fired from the privately owned Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation (MBC) for leading strikes against the network's president after he was accused of interfering with fair reporting—remained out of a job. At the end of January 2012, over 700 employees from MBC went on strike; the strike later expanded to other networks, including approximately 650 employees at South Korea's largest station, the public Korea Broadcasting System (KBS). The strike officially ended in July 2012. During the Lee administration, more than 180 journalists were penalized for writing critical reports about government policies, as well as for advocating for press freedom. In June 2013, approximately 180 journalists working for the daily *Hankook Ilbo* were dismissed and physically prevented from entering the newsroom by owner Chang Jae-ku after filing a complaint about alleged mismanagement of the newspaper's finances. Chang replaced a number of staff members with individuals close to him personally, causing critics to question the editorial independence of the daily.

Cases of physical violence or harassment of journalists are rare, and no cases were reported in 2013.

South Korea has a vibrant and diverse media sector, with numerous cable, terrestrial, and satellite television stations and more than 100 daily newspapers in Korean and English. Many newspapers are controlled by large industrial conglomerates and depend on major corporations for their advertising revenue. The television and radio sectors feature both public and private outlets, including an American Forces Network for the U.S. military. Five new cable television channels—four general-programming stations and one all-news channel—were launched in December 2011, two and a half years after the government revised a set of media laws to allow investment by conglomerates and newspaper companies in the broadcasting sector. These new channels are expected to affect the market dominance of KBS, MBC, and Seoul Broadcasting System (SBS), all of which had previously held exclusive rights to offer general programming, ranging from news and documentaries to sports and entertainment shows. Foreign media sources are generally accessible, with the exception of news from North Korea, which remains severely restricted.

Nearly 85 percent of the population accessed the internet in 2013, and a significant number of young people get their news exclusively from online sources. South Korean online media are especially vigorous and innovative. Aside from pro-North Korean content, the internet is generally unrestricted, but the government requires all website operators to indicate whether their sites might be harmful to youth.

## **2014 Scores**

### **Press Status**

Partly Free

### **Press Freedom Score**

**(0 = best, 100 = worst)**

## **Legal Environment**

**(0 = best, 30 = worst)**

9

## **Political Environment**

**(0 = best, 40 = worst)**

14

## **Economic Environment**

**(0 = best, 30 = worst)**

9